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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 006697

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS DECLARATION MEMBERS DISCUSS NEXT STEPS

REF: DAMASCUS 5499

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After six weeks of relative silence from the Damascus Declaration group, members have met again to discuss further action, according to Joumana Seif, daughter of Damascus Declaration signatory and jailed MP Riad Seif. Seif described discussions about a number of controversial issues within the Declaration, some procedural changes, and the guarded optimism of group members, referring to the six months before the next UNIIIC report as a window of opportunity. Seif said that members felt more relaxed about the likelihood of a SARG crackdown on them, while at the same time, anxious about decreased international pressure on the SARG. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Joumana Seif, daughter of Damascus Declaration signatory and jailed MP Riad Seif, told Poloff that a group of about 20 activists associated with the Declaration from throughout Syria met on December 27 to discuss what next steps are necessary for the future of the Declaration. According to Seif, discussions were held at length regarding three of the most controversial elements of the Damascus Declaration: the role of Islam, the role of the West, and the reference to Syria as an Arab civilization. Each participant was asked to draft his or her own working paper discussing these three issues for submission and discussion at a later date.

¶3. (C) Seif also noted that the Declaration group has decided to set deadlines for new individuals or groups to sign the Declaration, noting that the Declaration would be open for one or two months and then closed to new signatures until a later date in order to bring discussions to a temporary close. Seif also noted that Declaration members recognize the need for distribution and discussion of the Declaration among average Syrians and confirmed that the Damascus Declaration Committee (the members of which she identified at an earlier meeting in December as George Sabra, Suleiman Sumeri, Michel Kilo, Hassan Abdul Azim, Riyad al-Turk, and Fida Akram al-Hourani) would be meeting January 3, as had been reported in the press earlier this week.

¶4. (C) Seif described the meeting participants as "full of energy" and guardedly optimistic about the opposition's level of strength at the moment. Group members see a six-month window of time until the next UNIIIC report for taking action. According to Seif, the fear that had seized the group over the last six weeks following the arrest of Kamal Labwani and President Bashar al-Asad's November 10 speech to the nation had dissipated somewhat. However, group members are looking anxiously towards the January 19 military court trials of signatories Haithem al-Maleh and Hassan Abdul Azim as indicators of SARG reaction to the group. Seif noted,

however, that concerns about a decrease in international pressure following the second interim UNIIIC report (particularly the rumors about the possible return of Ambassador Scobey to Damascus) have caused anxiety among opposition figures.

SECHE